

INTERVIEW

André Laperrière: “Data on all levels is very valuable to the value chain”

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Alex Miller

The Executive Director of the Secretariat for Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN) is André Laperrière. Here, he describes what GODAN has to do to raise awareness about the potential of agricultural data and how to get policymakers and donors on-board.

How can the use of big data bring value to farmers in terms of profitability, productivity and building resilience?

Big data is very important and thanks to research and many initiatives arising from both civil society and the private sector, a number of products have been developed that bring big data right into the hands of farmers, no matter where they are, as long as they have a connection to the internet. For those with direct access, there are specialised, user-friendly applications that rely heavily on big data, which allow people to use their phones to get general data like weather information or agriculture-related data, or to get involved with the source of the big data itself. For example, with pest infestations or plant diseases, the system typically allows the user to take a photo of the infestation with their phone and, within a matter of seconds, it comes back to the farmer with an identification and with suggestions about how to resolve their issue.

What are the challenges when using farmers' data and what influence do these challenges have on policymakers and donors?

In terms of the end user, there are many challenges to making good use of farmers' data. One issue is that not all of the data that could be relevant to farmers is accessible to them. Sometimes in remote areas, being able to tap into online data can also be a challenge. The third level of challenges concerns privacy; a balance needs to be struck between how to tap into as much data as possible, whilst keeping in mind the privacy needs of the farmers. Data needs to be kept anonymous and it needs to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned. There has to be a win-win situation for farmers, as well as policymakers and donors.

Last year the Nairobi Declaration, initially signed by nine African governments and subsequently signed by two more, put nutrition and agricultural data into the public domain to combat food insecurity. What opportunities does this create?

Governments are now acknowledging that the data they compile about their citizens is basically funded by taxpayers and therefore belongs in the public domain. Secondly, they are also acknowledging that farmers can benefit a great deal from information compiled by researchers and academics, also known as higher-level data, which can help contribute towards higher yields and improved profitability. Weather data and market data help farmers buy their inputs at the cheapest prices and sell their produce at the best prices. Big companies are telling GODAN that they are constantly looking for new suppliers and data about the efficiency and resilience of small-scale producers to help them make informed business decisions. Data on all levels is very valuable to the value chain.

In the future, what needs to be done by GODAN and other institutions to raise awareness about the potential of agricultural data?

Our challenge at GODAN is to make sure that relevant data is available in a timely manner and in a format that works best for the farmer. For this purpose, we are working with more governments to implement policy roadmaps that will facilitate the dissemination of such data. We are also working with the private sector to help them contribute to this effort, because data stimulates business along the agricultural value chain. We also need to continue to expand our reach; we now have around 760 organisations and governments as partners around the world, who are increasingly aware of the importance of data and the need to make it more available to farmers. There are many more entities out there that need to be brought on-board, so we need to pursue our advocacy efforts whilst continuing to work with governments to make sure that we do all of this in a sustainable manner.



André Laperrière of GODAN speaks about the value of big data and the role policymakers and donors have in making agricultural data widely available